

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE BRIEFER: COLONEL DONALD BACON, CHIEF OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ SUBJECT: FOREIGN TERRORISTS MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 10:00 A.M. EST DATE: MONDAY, MARCH 3, 2008

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MR. HOLT: Well, we can go ahead and get started. If anybody joins us, they can -- we'll catch them up as they come online.

I'd like to welcome you today to the Bloggers Roundtable with Colonel Don Bacon with us this morning.

And Colonel Bacon, if you've got an opening statement, the floor is yours, sir.

COL. BACON: Okay, sure. Good morning to all of you gentlemen. I haven't seen all the specific names, but maybe ladies and gentlemen, just in case we have a lady on board as well.

What I'd like to do is give you just an overview of what's going on in Mosul and MND-North and some of the operations we've done this past week.

As you all know, as you're tracking Iraq, Mosul is the strategic center of gravity for al Qaeda. Our assessment is that they can't survive without the networks in Mosul. We also assess that to win they need to control Baghdad, but to survive they need Mosul to survive and that's been a focus of our operations. Particularly, we stepped it up since January.

On any given day about half to two-thirds of the attacks in Iraq are in and around Mosul and particularly in the Multinational Division-North, but especially around the Mosul area.

Since June, 17 of the 18 provinces have shown a significant decrease in attacks. The one exception is Nineveh, where Mosul is located. I would also add to include in those 17 Diyala and the Salahuddin provinces. You've heard of both and there has been a lot of activity. But even then, when you stand back and look from June till now, there's been a tremendous drop in violence in both Salahuddin and Diyala.

Thankfully, there has been a positive trend in the last month- and-a-half to two months since January, I would say, in Nineveh itself, but still, the levels of violence are higher than what we saw in June. So that's the one exception.

The coalition forces and ISF are increasing our focus in the Mosul area, particularly throughout Nineveh. Since January, the coalition forces have killed or captured 142 al Qaeda in Mosul itself. And a particular highlight is on 18 February we were able to capture the al Qaeda military leader of Mosul. He oversaw all of al Qaeda's operations in Mosul. We've not released his name yet, but intend to do so soon.

Right now we do have him in custody and some of the information we've gained from him helped us to find a particular network that was very lethal in Mosul. And this was a network in the southeast part of the town. And the leader of that network was called -- his name was Abu Yasir al-Saudi, otherwise known as Jar Allah. What we know about Jar Allah is he came to Iraq in August of 2007. He came to Iraq with three other Saudis. He was a Saudi himself. He had fought in Afghanistan prior to this, so we don't know when he left Afghanistan. We know he had been there previously as a fighter or terrorist. The four Saudis were sent to Mosul and there they became a very important part of the al Qaeda network there. Eventually, Jar Allah was moved up and put in charge of the network in southeast Mosul. He was also -- oversaw a foreign terrorist network of a lot of different type fighters, but particularly of Saudis, from what we've been able to learn.

We also assessed and analyzed that he had the most aggressive and most active of the networks in Mosul. In fact, we found that he was responsible for the roadside bomb attack that killed coalition force soldiers on the 28th of January.

So using the information that we were able to gain from the capture of the al Qaeda leader in Mosul, we were able to identify him or locate him on the 27th of February. We were able to track him -- it was him and associate named Hamdan, who is also Saudi, was driving in their Bongo truck. And we waited until we thought they were in a safer part of town where there would be minimal chance of collateral damage. We fired a missile using a helicopter asset -- coalition force helicopter -- and that missile entered over the driver's seat part of the compartment there and both members were killed. And we were able to get there later in the day and do a positive ID on both.

We've been aggressively targeting this network the last two months. So far we've been able to capture eight and kill four within this network. And today, we also were able to capture a night fighter that was part of his network.

So that is the summary I'd like to give and I'm ready to take questions.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much.

Colonel Don Bacon with us, the chief of Special Operations and Intelligence Information and Strategic Communications out of MNF-I.

Christian Lowe, you were first online, so why don't you get us started.

Q Hi, Colonel Bacon. It's Christian Lowe with Military.com.

Quick -- just a follow-up question to what you described here with the Jar Allah -- netting him. Was the emir that you captured earlier in the month -- the military emir -- assume that you sort of got intelligence from him on how to find Jar Allah. Is he in U.S. custody or is he in Iraqi custody?

COL. BACON: He's in coalition force custody at this time.

Q And then a broader question: You know, we've been reading stories recently about some tensions with the awakening groups or the CLCs, is what I sort of all them, and some of them sort of walking off the job. I know that a lot of your intelligence and information that goes into getting some of these bad guys comes from your relationships with the local sheiks and their CLCs. To what extent is some of this tension drifting over into your ability to find high-value targets and really gain the intelligence that you need from the locals?

COL. BACON: Well, first of all, a lot of your observations I want to affirm. We do get a lot of intelligence information from the CLCs. Last count that I had -- and it's about a week old, so maybe just a little bit off -- but there are 91,000 of these members. Abna al-Iraq -- using the Arabic term -- or Sons of Iraq. And we've also identified with Concerned Local Citizens. There's 91,000 of these folks, primarily just south of Baghdad, as well as MND-North and in the Anbar area.

And they are probably the leading contributors -- I'd have to analyze it just to make sure I got it right -- but they find most of our weapons caches. So they're getting tons of weapons that otherwise al Qaeda would have access to. That's been one area right there that's meant a lot to us. Also, the fact that they make it difficult for al Qaeda to get back into the villages that we have cleared. So I want to affirm what you said there.

And there has been some tension spots. There was some in Diyala where the Abna al-Iraq members there had walked off the job in protest of one of the police leadership there.

And I'm glad to say that they have gone back on the job this past week. So they're now standing guard and doing the things that they were doing previously.

There was also an issue south of Iraq at one time due to confusion -- a fratricide issue that occurred south of Baghdad. And that's been rectified as well.

One thing I'd like to say -- that at least both of these issues were solved peacefully. And they have a -- at least they were able to voice, if they have a concern with the Iraqi leadership. And living in a democracy, they should be able to do that. So we applaud the way it's been handled.

I would say that we've not detected, I guess, a shortage of intel coming from it. So I have not heard or heard any assessments coming from Multinational Division-North where this has impacted the information flow.

We were obviously concerned and worked with both parties to reconcile -- to help reconcile what happened up there. And thankfully, it looks like that's on track.

Q Okay.

And Jack, can I ask another one quickly, here?

MR. HOLT: Sure. Go ahead.

Q And Colonel Bacon, another question on Mosul: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the successes -- especially along the lines of these Jar Allah thing that you sent us -- that the Iraqi forces are having up there? Because I remember back in January, Maliki announced that Mosul was going to be a big deal for the Iraqi army. And I was in Diyala at the time, and in Diyala the Iraqi army was talking a lot about how they were initiating, planning and executing targeted operations on their own.

What are some of the things that maybe you can tell us about what the Iraqis themselves are doing along this line up in Mosul? COL. BACON: You know, I know they've reported some captures and successes up there. I wish I would have wrote them down, the specifics, but I know that they have reported some.

I will tell you: They have the majority of the forces up there. So frankly, they're carrying the burden of the fight in this region. And there would be no success or there'd be -- it would be much harder to achieve success in Mosul, obviously, without their -- they're a predominate member of the force. They know the area. But I don't have the specific captures like we just reported today, though I know they have reported some and I remember reading about them in the last month or two.

Q Okay. But you can say that they are getting some of these guys.

COL. BACON: Yes, they are. And the fact is, like I say, they are the majority force on the ground there. A lot of our operations are combined with them. So we often work in partnership with them. And this last particular operation, though, was a coalition force-only operation.

Q Okay.

Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Eric Hamilton.

Q Yes, sir.

I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about AQI as an enemy system in Mosul. It seems like the stronghold of the network is in western Mosul and then they sort of have enclaves in the southeast -- where you were describing previously -- and then in the northeast with sort of lines of communication running from Syria and then down the Tigris River Valley.

So I'm wondering, as you develop intelligence through captures like Jar Allah, if you are developing a bigger picture of how the network actually operates in Mosul and what the fight will look like over the coming months?

COL. BACON: Well, if you'll look at that chart that we sent you I think that will tell you something of the intelligence we're getting. You'll see a lot of specific names on that chart; you'll see the -- you know, the 12 captured or killed names on there. That's at the southeast Mosul network that we were able to identify. So I think you'll find it compelling that we were able to get that released, as well, to show the public. What makes Mosul important is it is a junction for financial networks for al Qaeda. It's also the hub of where the foreign terrorists come in via Syria. So, they'll come in

from the northern part of that border into Mosul, and then from there -- if they don't stay in Mosul then they'll try to go down the Tigris River Valley and make their way into Baghdad.

So it's a junction for finances that we know, as well as the foreign terrorists. And it's a little bit harder a city to penetrate, in that just the way it -- you know, the different ethnic groups that -- so, al Qaeda has perhaps a little easier time trying to hide. But we're working that hard. We're doing a lot of the same things that we're doing in Baghdad -- putting additional, you know, bases into the neighborhoods, and using a lot of the same tactics that have been successful so far here in Baghdad.

Q If I could just follow up on that, quickly. Similar to what was happening in Baghdad in 2006, do you see AQI using a, sort of, belt system around the outside of Mosul? Are there, sort of, villages and hamlets in the area that they're, sort of, using to operate from, and project forces into the city?

COL. BACON: Well, it seems like Mosul itself -- by itself, is a concern to us, but clearly we're finding al Qaeda activity in the neighboring villages and towns as well. You'll see in the Zab triangle -- if you're familiar with that, it's been an area of concern for us in the past. Clearly, the Tigris River Valley south of Mosul has been a concern.

I would point out, though, that the overall levels of violence has decreased, believe it or not. If you look at the totality of MND north, Nineveh -- or, even if you include Nineveh, if you look at Sallahuddin, Diyala, and all the provinces, overall levels of violence have gone down.

So really the nexus of it is Mosul because violence there is higher than June, even though, thankfully, we're seeing some good trends the last two months. We just got to keep it going that way. It's too early to beat our chest over it, though. If we get a third and fourth month we'll -- I'll tell you more about it later.

But Mosul itself is where the concern is. I will tell you, west of Mosul -- coming in from Syria into there, we have our hands full as well.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred.

Q Yes, sir, it's Lieutenant Fishman with the Air Force Pundit. Sir, could you talk -- just to follow up, kind of, this trend about moving forward from today. Obviously, we're having progress in Mosul, but is it something where it's going to be every day looks pretty much like the day before, where we just work on, kind of, the intel -- and we pick up one, you know, over the night.

Or is this all, kind of, moving forward to a culminating, like, stronger offensive as we would see back in Anbar; or is it something where, you know, we're going to have more Iraqi army troops; or is it just, we just -- just try to give us a picture of how you see the end game play out here.

COL. BACON: I think -- I do not think we'll have an overnight, just collapse of al Qaeda. I think it's going to be a continuous fight, where we're chipping away at them. I think if we can keep what we're -- what we're doing I

think we'll continue to see improved trends like we have January and February leading into March here.

So, I think you're going to see more of the same, I believe, in Mosul. We're going -- we're going to continue to put our bases in the neighborhoods; and continue to try to root out the leadership as we find it -- the al Qaeda leadership; try to cut off the flow in from Syria; and going after the financial networks, as well as the foreign terrorist networks.

And I think this one was a big network that we hit, so I believe there will be impact. I think it's going to be more of a chipping away thing, and it will be an incremental success.

Q And if I could just follow up then, you know, obviously, you saw Sons of Iraq being crucial in Anbar, and Baghdad, and the Sunni areas of Baghdad. And I've seen reports that there's not such a program going on in Mosul -- for a few different reasons, but do you see an eventuality where we would be able to tie in more with the leadership within the individual neighborhoods of Mosul, and how is that being developed?

COL. BACON: Are you referring maybe about the Sons of Iraq trying to do something similar?

Q Right. COL. BACON: You know, there is unique things in Mosul where the leadership there -- and you've got to -- can't take a cookie-cutter approach to what worked in Anbar and Baghdad, so there is some unique considerations there. There are a lot more Iraqi security forces in Mosul, and that they're able to utilize that.

So I think that it is a different situation, but, clearly, our forces and the Iraqi forces are working with the neighborhood leaders. That's how you win these kind of conflicts. But I think you'll have a little bit different flavor, when you look at the ratio of Sons of Iraq, versus what we've seen in Baghdad and Anbar -- just a little bit different dynamics.

MR. HOLT: Okay, and -- excuse me again. I've got some -- we've got a little extra time here so I'd like to open it up. Anybody have any follow-up questions?

Q I do. This is Christian Lowe again, from Military.com. Colonel Bacon, what can you tell us about what you're seeing on this issue of -- the al Qaeda's recruitment of females for suicide attacks, and that sort of thing? Can you update us on that?

COL. BACON: Yes, I'll give you a, sort of, a dual answer. And I don't want to sound like a speak with a forked tongue, but I will tell you, on one part of that fork we do see an increase in female suicide bombers. I wish I had the numbers in front of me, but there's been something like more in the last six months than what we've seen in the previous three or four years, if you look at total numbers.

However -- and now I'm speaking on the other side, when you look at the total number of suicide attacks, it still remains a very small number. So, in the -- you know, when you look at the problem in its totality, the female suicide bombers is a small number, but yet it's something that we've got to keep our eyes on because it has -- you know, we went from seeing one or two a year, to having -- I think it was four in January.

But I'll have to go back and double-check, but it's -- obviously, there's, there's a higher number and a clear increase, but it's still a very small share of the total. Q Well, what do think it says about the state of the enemy that we're confronting over there?

COL. BACON: Well -- has some potential insights on this. One is, we know we've had success reducing the flow of foreign terrorists going into Iraq. At its peak, we assessed it was about 120 a month, roughly. And we were able to drive it down. And, when I say "we," I would say the collective "we" -- clearly, the Iraqis, the Coalition Forces. We also had support from neighboring countries and source countries. And we got it down to around 40.

So that kind of reduction has impact on al Qaeda because at least half of these were being used as suicide bombers. So, clearly that -- it dried up, or at least shrunk their pool of suicide bombers. So I think that that is one insight you can derive from it. They were -- they're having to find new sources.

I would also point out that I think the increased defenses -- or the improved defenses of the Iraqi security forces also had an impact. It was more difficult for them -- for the enemy to drive in their suicide vehicles because of the T-walls and the checkpoints. So I think that this was seen as a tactic to try to get through those checkpoints and, make it more difficult for the Iraqis to search the ladies, which I know you're familiar with. So I think this was also part of the reason we're seeing more of the women suicide bombers.

Q Okay, thanks a lot.

Q I've got a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, go ahead.

Q Jarred Fishman again. There was a letter from a Dr. Malayab (sp) in Dora in Baghdad. And, from a STRATCOM perspective, he was relating how great the Sunnis look towards the Americans. And they basically call them the Sons of Iraq now, like "America's army." And, basically, they view themselves almost as America's troops because they view Maliki and his government as, basically, stooges of Iran, and that they get no support from the central government.

So that's the good news-bad news: On the one hand, our former enemies now love us, but on the other hand, you know, there's not that reconciliation on the political level, as far as providing electricity, and cleaning up the neighborhoods, and economic development.

So could you just speak to your overall STRATCOM objectives about how do we shift that trend so that the Sunnis on the ground start to see the government as a help and not as a menace to them?

COL. BACON: Well, I think we've seen positive work going with the national government, with the various elements of the Sunni provinces and the Sunni tribes. You can see it with the Sons of Iraq, with the hiring more of them into the Iraqi security forces. We've had, I think, some good progress there in recent months.

I think too, when you look at some of the political legislation, like the amnesty legislation that was passed, and, you know, that was very important

to the Sunnis there. And I -- there was also the -- I can't think of the proper name for it -- but the act that was passed to help bring in some of the Ba'athists, a mixed blessing there. There were some caveats in that that some of the Sunnis liked. But you know, Prime Minister Maliki and the Shi'a government is looking at passing some additional amendments to that.

So I think we're seeing some reconciliation movement, and our goal is to keep that progress going, that momentum. Clearly, there's more work to do there, though. But you know, there's been -- I was going to say -- five pieces of legislation passed, but one was vetoed, so hopefully they'll be able to re-look at that and get that back through. But that aside, we've had four major pieces of legislation passed, and that's important for reconciliation.

And we're seeing some growth in the economy, which is good. So there's progress but a lot more work to do in that area.

Q How about --

COL. BACON: If that's what your question points to.

Q Right. How about, though, on the day-to-day basis? Is the Sunni in his neighborhood in Dora's looking to see, do they have electricity, do they have a -- (inaudible)? Do they ever see anybody from the central government? And what kind of effects can the United States and the coalition forces do to make sure that the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Electricity and all the different central government people actually get out to the neighborhoods so that they don't just see the United States helping them, they see their own Iraqis helping them?

COL. BACON: I can't speak to Dora specifically. But I know we're very involved with supporting the national government and working with them as they go out to the provinces.

I will tell you a big change, a big improvement, if you look a year ago, in the national government getting out to the local areas, to the various provinces and connecting with the provincial and local leaders. That's just something they've got to grow into. I can't speak to Dora specifically in this case.

Electricity is a whole separate issue. You know, I've been able to listen to some of the experts talk about this. And there was no investment through almost the entire time of Saddam's reign. So there is just so much work that has to be done there. And at one time, most of the electricity was given to Baghdad, and now it's a little more distributed evenly. That's had more of an impact on Baghdad, obviously, because their share has gone down, even though it's a more equal share per capita. So there is a lot of work in that area alone.

But to go back to your main question, we are actually seeing a lot of hard work by the Iraqi national government to get out to the local areas. And since I've been here the last nine months, I've been able to see the improvement myself.

Q Jack, can I have time for one more question?

MR. HOLT: Yes, go ahead.

Q This is Eric Hamilton again from the Institute for the Study of War.

I want to get back to Mosul for a second. As I study the city, it seems like, before the fall of the regime, there was a stronghold for the former military. And I know that there's sort of a sympathetic population there for the insurgency maybe because of these former military officers that are there. And in the last week, I've seen on the MNF website that there was a drive to recruit some local Iraqis in the area. And I think half of them were former military officers. Is this a way to sort of bypass the problem in setting up a Sons of Iraq organization in Mosul? And what role do you see former military officers playing in the army up there?

COL. BACON: Well, you will see a little more emphasis in Mosul on a higher ratio of ISF versus the Sons of Iraq. That is a fact. And you're right. There was a very successful recruiting drive in Mosul. I wish I could remember the numbers offhand, but I believe there was about 2,000 Mosul citizens that volunteered to serve in the ISF this week. So -- in fact, during one of their recruiting drives, there was actually a mortar attack. They stayed there and continued signing up. So they showed their bravery right there.

I think it is important that the junior-level folks from the previous regime have a chance to get back into this country and be part of the institution. That's how we were able to bring reconciliation with that part of the society. So I think it's important thing we're doing. That's why that law, the reconciliation or bringing back some of the junior Ba'athists was very important.

Q Is this a sign that maybe there isn't such a sympathetic population in Mosul, that there is a large portion that maybe won't form into a Sons of Iraq group but does oppose the presence of AQI and other insurgents?

COL. BACON: Well, I think there was more sympathy at one time for al Qaeda. But over time, I think that sympathy has worn off is what you're seeing. The bombings and the continuous finding of executed members all over the area over time that that has caused al Qaeda to lose much support that it had. And I think there was initially some fertile ground there, but I think that that is diminishing. And I think that's what you're seeing.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anything else?

All right. Colonel Bacon, do you have any closing thoughts for us, sir?

COL. BACON: No. I think this is my fifth time on the bloggers, and I appreciate the opportunity to share what we're doing here, so thank you for your time.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us, Colonel Donald J. Bacon. He's the chief of Special Operations and Intelligence Information for Strategic Communications with Multi- National Force Iraq.

And thank you, sir. We look forward to speaking to you again.

COL. BACON: Okay, thank you. You all have a great day.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you, sir.

END.